

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Fisheries Division

OVERVIEW

The Fisheries Division manages the state's fishery resource and aquatic ecosystems to meet the public's demand for recreational opportunities and stewardship of aquatic wildlife. Annually, there are over three million angler days in Montana. The estimated annual economic value of expenditures from fishing activity are over \$900 million. Montana's reputation for providing excellent fishing continues to make it a national and international angling destination. Additionally, our access program provides for the increasing demands of non-angling water recreators. The Fisheries Division has four main areas of focus: Fisheries Management; Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS); Aquatic Habitat; and Water Access and Recreation Management.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Provided enhanced angler opportunity and native fish restoration by stocking waters with 33 million warm water fish (e.g. walleye, sauger, pike, bass, catfish), and five million cold water fish (e.g., trout, salmon, grayling) annually. Fish hatcheries maintain sport fisheries, provide urban fishing opportunities, and conserve at risk populations throughout the state. Despite complications due to the Covid-19 pandemic, hatcheries filled most requests for fish throughout the state. Mild weather in the late spring and early summer helped to produce greater numbers of walleye fingerlings released at a larger size than previous years. Also, good survival of rainbow trout and kokanee salmon at production facilities allowed extra plants where needed. FWP conservation broodstocks at Washoe Park Trout Hatchery and Yellowstone River Trout Hatchery were able to continue to infuse wild stocks to offset genetic issues from long term rearing in artificial environments. The success of infusions will ensure the safe use of these broodstocks for conservation purposes for many years to come.
- The AIS program has continued to adapt and improve throughout 2019 and 2020. The program and partners conducted over 173,000 watercraft inspections in 2020, a record number of inspections in the state. This is due, in part, to expanding coordination with partners (e.g., tribes, counties, conservation districts, Whitefish Lake Institute, Glacier National Park) to better address the threat of AIS movement on watercraft in high risk areas. Aquatic weeds were found on over 1,100 vessels and 35 vessels were intercepted transporting zebra or quagga mussels. The AIS monitoring program collected and processed over 2,600 early detection samples from over 200 waterbodies. No invasive mussel populations were detected in 2020. New Zealand mudsnails were detected in one of the State Fish Hatcheries in 2020, the hatchery was quarantined and decontaminated.
- Efforts to enhance water recreation opportunities in the past two years have included the acquisition of four new Fishing Access Sites, with several more being pursued. Recreational use of our rivers continues to expand and has led to crowding and conflict in numerous locations, which became more evident in 2020 as more people turned to outdoor recreation during the Covid19 pandemic. On the Madison River, following more than eight years of public input and recreational use assessment, the Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted recreational rules in December 2020 that place certain limitations on both commercial and non-commercial use. In coming years, the Madison Recreation Rules will be extensively monitored to ensure their effectiveness.
- The FWP Community Pond Program awarded \$74,000 for community projects in 2020. The program provides funding to improve fishing and recreation opportunities for kids and adults in communities

across Montana. Projects completed or started in 2020 include fishing access jetties on Lake Elmo in Billings, a handicap accessible fishing dock at Baker Lake, and an accessible floating fishing dock at Lake Sheloole near Shelby, among other projects.

- In 2019 and 2020 the Future Fisheries Improvement Program granted over \$1.3 million for wild fish habitat restoration. Combined with matching funds from partners, over \$8.6 million was spent on habitat projects. Types of projects completed included improved fish passage at road crossings and irrigation structures, improved spawning structures, improved stream flows, fish screens on irrigation structures, and construction of barriers to conserve isolated native fish populations among others.
- Over the past two years, the Pollution Program's efforts have focused on collaboration with state and federal partners on the development of site-specific selenium criteria for Lake Kootenai and the Kootenai River, the first water quality standard based on fish tissue concentrations. This new criterion, recently adopted, will serve as a basis to protect Montana's aquatic life from pollution from Canadian coal mining operations. Sampling efforts to better understand contamination in Clark Fork River fish, surrounding the former Smurfit Stone Container mill site, has also been a priority and resulted in new fish consumption guidance being issued. These efforts will continue as the process moves from Risk Assessments to the Remedial Investigative stage of Superfund.

CHALLENGES

- The general increase in numbers and types of recreationists on public waters has led to conflicts in some areas. The Division will enhance monitoring efforts of heavily used waters in order to better anticipate problems that arise. Additionally, continued increase of angler and recreational use could be having detrimental impacts to fisheries on some popular rivers. Additional creel and recreational use data coupled with fisheries monitoring data is needed to determine fishery impacts and if additional options are needed.
- The use of Fishing Access Sites for fishing and other types of recreation continues to increase, with campsite use being particularly popular in 2020. This has increased maintenance and staffing needs at the more heavily used sites. Operating these sites during the pandemic added additional challenges related to staff and public safety.
- Water quality issues related to contaminants in fish in the Clark Fork River and Lake Kootenai have necessitated fish consumption advisories relative to selenium, dioxins and furans. The Division continues to look for creative ways to get this important information to the public in a timely manner.
- The hatchery system is facing a backlog of major maintenance projects involving critical infrastructure that, if unattended to, could result in loss of fish production capacity or could result in a significant fish kill. Major projects include water line improvements, pond repairs and upgrades to settling basins to become compliant with permitting requirements related to discharge. Maintenance on five older residences is required to bring them up to code. While maintenance projects have been done on these residences, the underlying condition is questionable and resident safety is a concern.
- Use of live baitfish for angling is a traditional fishing method in eastern and central Montana; however, use of live baitfish carries a high risk of spreading pathogens and invasive species to other waters and often leads to unauthorized introductions to other waters. A detailed analysis of live baitfish use and availability is needed to identify ways to conserve populations of live baitfish in popular collection areas and evaluate risks in order to maintain the use of live baitfish as a fishing method.